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THE HERO IN FICTION.

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SOMETIMES a nightmarish sensation comes over me, that I am living somebody else's life—that I am repeating with a helpless, hideous regularity the thoughts and deeds, the blunders and successes, of some creature that lived ages ago. If heroes of fiction were endowed with the power of sensation, they would, no doubt, be oppressed with a similar consciousness of preëxistence. For most of them have not only their prototypes, but their exact counterparts, in the ages of the past. Environments may change, and are continually changing ; and a certain modification in the hero's external guise and speech and sentiment may be the result of what we call "modern improvement." But in their innermost core the characters remain essentially the same. The fundamental traits of human nature, transmitted by inheritance from generation to generation, seem capable of but a limited amount of variation, and it would seem as if the novelists had already reached the limit.

The novel has existed, in one shape or another, from the earliest period of which history has preserved the record. By the novel I mean literature of entertainment ; and when the art of writing was still unknown, the spoken story took the place of the written. Bards, *raconteurs*, rhapsodists, scalds, troubadours, ballad-singers, *improvisatori* have at different times ministered, and, in part, do yet minister, to this innate craving for fiction among the classes which are never reached by literature in the stricter sense. Whether there have been found cuneiform novels on the sun-baked bricks of Babylon and Nineveh I do not know ; but the fragments of mythological poems which have been discovered suffice to show that the cuneiform equivalent for a novelist

was not wanting. As for the Egyptians, their ingeniously-elaborate style of writing must have been a sad restraint upon the hieroglyphic novelist when he was inclined to be prolific ; and that may be one of the reasons why no hieroglyphic novels have been unearthed in the tombs or temples or pyramids. The king had apparently (if we may judge by the extravagant fictions concerning himself and his deeds which he inscribed upon the public monuments) a monopoly on novel-writing, as on everything else that was pleasant and profitable. The priests worked out his plots in prose and verse, and supplied heroic embellishments *ad libitum*.

Having established this broad definition of fiction, let us take a look at the gallery of popular heroes which the novels of all ages supply. The oldest hero, as well as the newest (if we except the very latest development), is the man who looms a head above all the people. It is the king, the chieftain, the demi-god, whose strength, and prowess, and beauty, physical or moral, thrill the soul, and kindle, by admiring sympathy, the heroic possibilities in our own hearts. Each nation sees its own ideal in this type, and modifies it in accordance with its character. Achilles, though swift-footed, brave and beautiful, is petulant as a child, hot-tempered, and by no means a model of virtue, but, for all that, superb adjectives are heaped upon him, showing that he was meant to be a national ideal. Still nearer to this distinction comes the wily Ulysses, whose readiness of resource, faithlessness, and cheerful mendacity are so remote from Germanic notions of heroism that a modern novelist, if he used him at all, would be compelled to assign to him the part of the villain.

Sigfrid in the "Nibelungen Lied" is, perhaps, the completest general embodiment of the Germanic hero. Sigfrid is, like Achilles, brave, beautiful, and strong, and he is also repeatedly described as swift (*der snelle recke*) ; but here the resemblance ceases. Even though the story in the mediæval German version may contradict the poet, when he calls him faithful, it is obvious that the potion of oblivion (which the Icelandic version supplies) is responsible for his breach of faith to Brunhild. He is truthful, gentle, forgiving, an ardent, chivalrous lover and a chaste and affectionate husband. He resembles in many respects the Celtic King Arthur,—also a god-descended hero,—but is more warmly human, and less of a faultless prig. In the Icelandic version in

the Elder Edda, he is wilder, more ferocious, more frankly barbarian. There is a freshness of dawn and a new-born world upon his love for Brunhild—a feature which is most exquisitely preserved in Wagner's opera "Sigfrid," but, beyond a proud truthfulness and regard for his promise, he is not troubled with many modern virtues. As an heroic type, he recurs with slight modifications in a number of the Norse Sagas; and he has been and is the hero of innumerable English, German, and Scandinavian novels. In fact, the romantic school of fiction knows scarcely any other style of hero; and is forced, in order to excite admiration, to repeat the Sigfrid type, more or less disguised, *ad infinitum*. Take the heroes of Walter Scott's novels, one by one (conspicuously Ivanhoe), and what are they but pale reflections of the general Germanic ideal? Tremendously brave, surpassingly strong, extravagantly virtuous, pursued by hostile powers which threaten to overwhelm them, but over which they ultimately triumph,—is not that a fair description of the usual hero of romanticism? Whether he wears doublet and hose, or frock-coat and trousers, he is always the same fellow at heart, and he rarely fails to win, as the prize of his valor, his female counterpart, for whose sake he breaks many a lance in life's perilous tourney. In Mr. Marion Crawford's novels, "Mr. Isaacs" and "Dr. Claudius," I recently renewed my acquaintance with the Sigfrid type in a modernized guise, and in Cooper's "Leather-stocking Tales" he is perpetually recurring.

Another type of the romantic hero is represented by the fairy tale of the Poor Boy who kills the Ogre and marries the beautiful Princess. Boots he used to be called in the English fairy-tale, and in the Norwegian he is called Ashiepattle. In the so-called Romantic Sagas of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries he is a favorite hero. He is of lowly origin, has had no advantages of education, is often buffeted and maltreated by his associates; but by dint of indomitable energy and perseverance conquers all obstacles, and finally marries his employer's daughter, or whoever else the Princess may be upon whom he has set his heart. Of course, if the author is a cruel wretch, with no regard for tender readers, he may vary the *dénouement* by landing the fair lady in the arms of the rich and hateful rival, whom the odious parent has selected for a son-in-law; but then the chances are that son-in-law No. 1 will be short lived, and the loving

hearts will be united in the last chapter. Dickens is very fond of this Ashiepattle style of hero, and has used him with success in "Dombey and Son," "David Copperfield," and many other romances. In the French novel, he is the young man from the provinces who comes to Paris in *sabots* and rises to fame and fortune. Daudet has him in "Le Nabab," but though he gets his Princess, he has to content himself without half the kingdom. In fact, the modern novelists, since the death of Dumas *père*, are no longer so lavish of kingdoms, and sometimes, from sheer malice, pursue Ashiepattle and his Princess beyond the honeymoon, and broadly hint that they did not "live happily ever afterward." But that is so reprehensible that I wish it could be forbidden by an act of Congress, or that a tax might be levied (it is such an easy thing to get a tax levied and so hard to get one removed) on every novel that does not end happily.

In the American novel, the Ashiepattle hero is very popular under the guise of the self-made man. Our National history is really a romance of the Ashiepattle among the nations, who beat the British ogre, and wedded the beautiful Princess Liberty, and conquered a kingdom compared with which those of the ancient fairy tales were scarcely worth considering. We have, therefore, a National sympathy with Ashiepattle in his struggles, and demand that his success shall be brilliant and pronounced. It will not do to cheat him out of the fruit of his labor, as Mr. Howells has done in "Lemuel Barker," and Mr. James in "The American," or to develop weaknesses in him which make him unworthy of success, as the former has done in "A Modern Instance," and the latter in "Roderick Hudson." Hardly more commendable is the example of Mr. Howe, who, in his powerful novel, "The Story of a Country Town," made the road to success itself so gloomy and the success itself so modest as not to seem worth the trouble of the pursuit. It is our National comedy, as well as the National tragedy—this struggle of the Poor Boy for the Princess and half the kingdom; and we may be pardoned if we take a more personal interest in the fortunes of the hero than is compatible with artistic impartiality.

A type of hero which is happily rare in American fiction is what Rousseau calls "the grand and virtuous criminal," whom Bulwer domesticated in English literature in "Eugene Aram." The type was popular in Germany at a much earlier period, as

Schiller had invested it with the charm of his genius in Karl Moor in "The Robbers" and in "Fiesco." The man who wages war single-handed against a corrupt and pusillanimous society—who is forced into the career of a criminal because all roads of honorable utility are closed to him—was a direct outgrowth of the sentimental philosophy of Rousseau, and at different times occupied the fancy of every poet and novelist who came under his influence. The Problematic Character, which Goethe sketched and Spielhagen elaborately studied, is essentially the same type, and has yet an enormous vogue in the German novel. In Spielhagen, the Problematic Character ends his life on the barricades or by suicide, but usually escapes the ignominy of a jail. He is a radical of an extreme type, and labors for the reconstruction of society according to the socialistic ideal.

It will be observed that all the heroes I have so far described have one thing in common. They are all heroic. They loom a head above all the people. The heroic criminal is no exception, for he is meant to demonstrate, not his own depravity, but that of the mediocre herd who are incapable of appreciating his grandeur. The latest development of the novel breaks with this tradition. It really abolishes the hero. It has, to be sure, a central character about whom the events group themselves; but this central character founds his claim upon the reader's interest, not upon any exceptional brilliancy or attraction, but upon his typical capacity, as representing a large class of his fellow-men. This is the great and radical change which the so-called realistic school of fiction has inaugurated, and it is fraught with momentous consequences. The novel, as soon as it sets itself so serious an aim, is no longer an irresponsible play of fancy, however brilliant, but acquires an historical importance in relation to the age to which it belongs. The Germans are never weary of emphasizing what they call *die kulturgeschichtliche Bedeutung des Romans*; and it represents to me the final test by which a novelist is to be judged. Thackeray, for instance, is, to my mind, a far greater novelist than Dickens, because he has, to a large extent, chronicled the manners, speech, and sentiments of England during his own day. He dealt chiefly with what is called good society, and the completeness, the truthfulness, and the vividness of his picture no one can question. Dickens, though perhaps more brilliantly equipped, had no

ambition to be truthful. He had the romantic ideal in view, and produced a series of extremely entertaining tales, which are incidentally descriptive of manners, but caricatured, extravagant, and fantastic. The future historian, who should undertake to reconstruct the Victorian England from the romances of Dickens, would be justified in the conclusion that the majority of Englishmen during that period were afflicted with some cerebral disorder. He might with equal profit study "Alice behind the Looking-Glass."

Thackeray's heroes, then, derive their chief value from the fact of their not being heroic. Arthur Pendennis, Clive Newcome, Harry Esmond, Captain Dobbin, Rawdon Crawley, and all the rest of them,—how well we know them ! How near they are to our hearts ! There is a chapter of social history bound up in every one of them. They were in the best sense representative and typical. That was the way Englishmen acted, spoke, and felt during the first half of the nineteenth century. Thackeray's novels are an historical document of unimpeachable veracity. But take the Guppys, Smallweeds, Tootses, Murdocks, Betsy Trotwoods, and Micawbers—how utterly absurd and unreal they seem by comparison ! A critic would have to be preternaturally acute to find in them any trace of representative value. Even George Eliot's heroes, though they are psychologically true, have less of the earthy flavor of reality about them than those of Thackeray. They were drawn, primarily, to illustrate a moral law or problem, and they are admirably adapted for this purpose. We know them; but we know them less intimately than we do Colonel Newcome, and Clive, and Pen. Lydgate is typical, both as to character and fate, and so are Rosamond and Sir James Chettam, Casaubon and Dorothea. But they lack the last touch of substantiality which distinguishes such a character as, for instance, old Major Pendennis or the sportive Harry Foker. They would, for the purposes of my hypothetical historian, be less valuable than the very sordid company who are immortalized between the covers of "Vanity Fair."

Any observant reader will have noticed, as a further evidence of the evolution of fiction, that the hero of the modern novel is no longer a gentleman of leisure, whose sole business in life is to make love and run into debt. It was supposed formerly that a hero would have to be high-born, handsome, and rich in order to

command the interest of young ladies (who, at all times, have been the novelist's chief patrons), and all gifts of nature and fortune were, therefore, lavished upon him. But either the sentiments of the fair damsels must have been misunderstood, or less regard is now paid to them. For the heroes of the most modern tales are apt to be men who are neither high-born nor rich; who have much business of a practical sort to attend to, and write their *billets doux* on half-sheets with the printed letter-heads of their firm. Engineers have especially developed an extraordinary popularity, in witness of which I might cite Ohnet's "*Maître des Forges*," Daudet's "*Jack*," Mrs. Hodgson Burnett's "*That Lass o' Lowrie's*," and a multitude of others. The merchant, the editor, the farmer, and even the reporter and the clerk and the farm-hand are now attracting the attention of the novelist, and they are being portrayed not only in their leisure hours, but in their offices among bills of exchange and boxes, bales and barrels, ploughs and harrows. "The novelist," says the German critic, Julian Schmidt, "must seek the German people where the German people is to be found, *i. e.*, at its labor." And it is not only the German people which is to be found at its labor. The American people has probably less leisure than any nation under the sun, and its novelists, if they aim at realism, must acquire the art of converting the National industries into literary material. Mr. Howells has made an admirable beginning in this direction in "*The Rise of Silas Lapham*," which depicts a typical American merchant, a self-made man, in his strength as in his limitations. We see the whole life of the man in all its important phases; his pride in his mineral paint; his social insecurity and awkwardness; his pleasure in his horses; his relations with his family. In short, Colonel Silas Lapham is as vivid a reality to us as any of his counterparts around the corner, whom we meet daily, but do not know half so well. Silas Lapham, however, enables us to know them better and to judge them more justly.

I am aware that journalists are disposed to resent the picture which Mr. Howells has drawn of them in Bartley Hubbard in "*A Modern Instance*." It is, perhaps, possible that Bartley is not strikingly typical as a journalist; but that he embodies a very prevalent type in our National life is, I think, beyond dispute. The unscrupulous smart young man, with a kind of superficial cleverness, but utterly destitute of moral sense—who is there among us

who does not know him to his cost? There is not an American village which cannot exhibit him in numerous varied editions. I believe that it is also a fact that he is apt to drift into journalism, as offering the shortest and easiest road to the eminence which he feels sure is within his reach.

There is not another American novelist who has apprehended so deeply and portrayed so faithfully two such types of our National life as Silas Lapham and Bartley Hubbard. Mr. James does not know the country well enough to achieve anything so vital in the way of American portraiture, and each new book which he puts forth shows a further alienation from his nationality. His point of view is already that of the American colonist in Paris, London, or Rome, who has learned to be ashamed of his origin. Even such types as Mr. Newman in "The American," and Roderick and Rowland in "Roderick Hudson" (admirable though they be) lack the strong flavor of the soil which delights us in Bartley and Silas. While Mr. Howells appears to be getting a stronger grip on reality, as it fashions itself on this side of the Atlantic, Mr. James soars, like a high-bred and cynical eagle, in the upper air of the best British society, and looks down upon his former country with a sad, critical disapproval. Nevertheless, these two novelists, each within his own sphere and limitations, represent the latest evolution of realistic fiction. Their unheroic heroes are, as a rule, social types; and if (as I devoutly hope) long lives and unimpaired vigor be granted them, they may leave behind them a National portrait-gallery which will repay the study of the future historian.

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